

GEORG EBERS

THE SISTERS.

VOLUME 2

Georg Ebers
The Sisters. Volume 2

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CHAPTER VII

In the very midst of the white wall with its bastions and ramparts, which formed the fortifications of Memphis, stood the old palace of the kings, a stately structure built of bricks, recently plastered, and with courts, corridors, chambers and halls without number, and veranda-like out-buildings of gayly-painted wood, and a magnificent pillared banqueting-hall in the Greek style. It was surrounded by verdurous gardens, and a whole host of laborers tended the flower-beds and shady alleys, the shrubs and the trees; kept the tanks clean and fed the fish in them; guarded the beast-garden, in which quadrupeds of every kind, from the heavy-treading elephant to the light-footed antelope, were to be seen, associated with birds innumerable of every country and climate.

A light white vapor rose from the splendidly fitted bath-house, loud barkings resounded from the dog-kennels, and from the long array of open stables came the neighing of horses with the clatter and stamp of hoofs, and the rattle of harness and chains. A semicircular building of new construction adjoining the old palace was the theatre, and many large tents for the bodyguard, for ambassadors and scribes, as well as others, serving as banqueting-halls for the various court-officials, stood both within the garden and outside its enclosing walls. A large space leading from the city itself to the royal citadel was given up to the soldiers, and there, by the side of the shady court-yards, were the houses of the police-guard and the prisons. Other soldiers were quartered in tents close to the walls of the palace itself. The clatter of their arms and the words of command, given in Greek, by their captain, sounded out at this particular instant, and up into the part of the buildings occupied by the queen; and her apartments were high up, for in summer time Cleopatra preferred to live in airy tents, which stood among the broad-leaved trees of the south and whole groves of flowering shrubs, on the level roof of the palace, which was also lavishly decorated with marble statues. There was only one way of access to this retreat, which was fitted up with regal splendor; day and night it was fanned by currents of soft air, and no one could penetrate uninvited to disturb the queen's retirement, for veteran guards watched at the foot of the broad stair that led to the roof, chosen from the Macedonian "Garde noble," and owing as implicit obedience to Cleopatra as to the king himself. This select corps was now, at sunset, relieving guard, and the queen could hear the words spoken by the officers in command and the clatter of the shields against the swords as they rattled on the pavement, for she had come out of her tent into the open air, and stood gazing towards the west, where the glorious hues of the sinking sun flooded the bare, yellow limestone range of the Libyan hills, with their innumerable tombs and the separate groups of pyramids; while the wonderful coloring gradually tinged with rose-color the light silvery clouds that hovered in the clear sky over the valley of Memphis, and edged them as with a rife of living gold.

The queen stepped out of her tent, accompanied by a young Greek girl—the fair Zoe, daughter of her master of the hunt Zenodotus, and Cleopatra's favorite lady-in-waiting—but though she looked towards the west, she stood unmoved by the magic of the glorious scene before her; she screened her eyes with her hand to shade them from the blinding rays, and said:

"Where can Cornelius be staying! When we mounted our chariots before the temple he had vanished, and as far as I can see the road in the quarters of Sokari and Serapis I cannot discover his vehicle, nor that of Eulaeus who was to accompany him. It is not very polite of him to go off in this way without taking leave; nay, I could call it ungrateful, since I had proposed to tell him on our way home all about my brother Euergetes, who has arrived to-day with his friends. They are not yet acquainted, for Euergetes was living in Cyrene when Publius Cornelius Scipio landed in Alexandria.

Stay! do you see a black shadow out there by the vineyard at Kakem; That is very likely he; but no—you are right, it is only some birds, flying in a close mass above the road. Can you see nothing more? No!—and yet we both have sharp young eyes. I am very curious to know whether Publius Scipio will like Euergetes. There can hardly be two beings more unlike, and yet they have some very essential points in common."

"They are both men," interrupted Zoe, looking at the queen as if she expected cordial assent to this proposition.

"So they are," said Cleopatra proudly. "My brother is still so young that, if he were not a king's son, he would hardly have outgrown the stage of boyhood, and would be a lad among other Epheboi, —[Youths above 18 were so called]—and yet among the oldest there is hardly a man who is his superior in strength of will and determined energy. Already, before I married Philometor, he had clutched Alexandria and Cyrene, which by right should belong to my husband, who is the eldest of us three, and that was not very brotherly conduct—and indeed we had other grounds for being angry with him; but when I saw him again for the first time after nine months of separation I was obliged to forget them all, and welcome him as though he had done nothing but good to me and his brother—who is my husband, as is the custom of the families of Pharaohs and the usage of our race. He is a young Titan, and no one would be astonished if he one day succeeded in piling Pelion upon Ossa. I know well enough how wild he can often be, how unbridled and recalcitrant beyond all bounds; but I can easily pardon him, for the same bold blood flows in my own veins, and at the root of all his excesses lies power, genuine and vigorous power. And this innate pith and power are just the very thing we most admire in men, for it is the one gift which the gods have dealt out to us with a less liberal hand than to men. Life indeed generally dams its overflowing current, but I doubt whether this will be the case with the stormy torrent of his energy; at any rate men such as he is rush swiftly onwards, and are strong to the end, which sooner or later is sure to overtake them; and I infinitely prefer such a wild torrent to a shallow brook flowing over a plain, which hurts no one, and which in order to prolong its life loses itself in a misty bog. He, if any one, may be forgiven for his tumultuous career; for when he pleases my brother's great qualities charm old and young alike, and are as conspicuous and as remarkable as his faults—nay, I will frankly say his crimes. And who in Greece or Egypt surpasses him in grasp and elevation of mind?"

You may well be proud of him," replied Zoe. Not even Publius Scipio himself can soar to the height reached by Euergetes."

"But, on the other hand, Euergetes is not gifted with the steady, calm self-reliance of Cornelius. The man who should unite in one person the good qualities of those two, need yield the palm, as it seems to me, not even to a god!"

"Among us imperfect mortals he would indeed be the only perfect one," replied Zoe. "But the gods could not endure the existence of a perfect man, for then they would have to undertake the undignified task of competing with one of their own creatures."

"Here, however, comes one whom no one can accuse!" cried the young queen, as she hastened to meet a richly dressed woman, older than herself, who came towards her leading her son, a pale child of two years old. She bent down to the little one, tenderly but with impetuous eagerness, and was about to clasp him in her arms, but the fragile child, which at first had smiled at her, was startled; he turned away from her and tried to hide his little face in the dress of his nurse—a lady of rank—to whom he clung with both hands. The queen threw herself on her knees before him, took hold of his shoulder, and partly by coaxing and partly by insistence strove to induce him to quit the sheltering gown and to turn to her; but although the lady, his wet-nurse, seconded her with kind words of encouragement, the terrified child began to cry, and resisted his mother's caresses with more and more vehemence the more passionately she tried to attract and conciliate him. At last the nurse lifted him up, and was about to hand him to his mother, but the wilful little boy cried more than before, and throwing his arms convulsively round his nurse's neck he broke into loud cries.

In the midst of this rather unbecoming struggle of the mother against the child's obstinacy, the clatter of wheels and of horses' hoofs rang through the court-yard of the palace, and hardly had the sound reached the queen's ears than she turned away from the screaming child, hurried to the parapet of the roof, and called out to Zoe:

"Publius Scipio is here; it is high time that I should dress for the banquet. Will that naughty child not listen to me at all? Take him away, Praxinoa, and understand distinctly that I am much dissatisfied with you. You estrange my own child from me to curry favor with the future king. That is base, or else it proves that you have no tact, and are incompetent for the office entrusted to you. The office of wet-nurse you duly fulfilled, but I shall now look out for another attendant for the boy. Do not answer me! no tears! I have had enough of that with the child's screaming." With these words, spoken loudly and passionately, she turned her back on Praxinoa—the wife of a distinguished Macedonian noble, who stood as if petrified—and retired into her tent, where branched lamps had just been placed on little tables of elegant workmanship. Like all the other furniture in the queen's dressing-tent these were made of gleaming ivory, standing out in fine relief from the tent-cloth which was sky-blue woven with silver lilies and ears of corn, and from the tiger-skins which covered all the cushions, while white woollen carpets, bordered with a waving scroll in blue, were spread on the ground.

The queen threw herself on a seat in front of her dressing-table, and sat staring at herself in a mirror, as if she now saw her face and her abundant, reddish-fair hair for the first time; then she said, half turning to Zoe and half to her favorite Athenian waiting-maid, who stood behind her with her other women:

"It was folly to dye my dark hair light; but now it may remain so, for Publius Scipio, who has no suspicion of our arts, thought this color pretty and uncommon, and never will know its origin. That Egyptian headdress with the vulture's head which the king likes best to see me in, the young Greek Lysias and the Roman too, call barbaric, and so every one must call it who is not interested in the Egyptians. But to-night we are only ourselves, so I will wear the chaplet of golden corn with sapphire grapes. Do you think, Zoe, that with that I could wear the dress of transparent bombyx silk that came yesterday from Cos? But no, I will not wear that, for it is too slight a tissue, it hides nothing and I am now too thin for it to become me. All the lines in my throat show, and my elbows are quite sharp—altogether I am much thinner. That comes of incessant worry, annoyance, and anxiety. How angry I was yesterday at the council, because my husband will always give way and agree and try to be pleasant; whenever a refusal is necessary I have to interfere, unwilling as I am to do it, and odious as it is to me always to have to stir up discontent, disappointment, and disaffection, to take things on myself and to be regarded as hard and heartless in order that my husband may preserve undiminished the doubtful glory of being the gentlest and kindest of men and princes. My son's having a will of his own leads to agitating scenes, but even that is better than that Philopator should rush into everybody's arms. The first thing in bringing up a boy should be to teach him to say 'no.' I often say 'yes' myself when I should not, but I am a woman, and yielding becomes us better than refusal—and what is there of greater importance to a woman than to do what becomes her best, and to seem beautiful?"

"I will decide on this pale dress, and put over it the net-work of gold thread with sapphire knots; that will go well with the head-dress. Take care with your comb, Thais, you are hurting me! Now—I must not chatter any more. Zoe, give me the roll yonder; I must collect my thoughts a little before I go down to talk among men at the banquet. When we have just come from visiting the realm of death and of Serapis, and have been reminded of the immortality of the soul and of our lot in the next world, we are glad to read through what the most estimable of human thinkers has said concerning such things. Begin here, Zoe."

Cleopatra's companion, thus addressed, signed to the unoccupied waiting-women to withdraw, seated herself on a low cushion opposite the queen, and began to read with an intelligent and practised intonation; the reading went on for some time uninterrupted by any sound but the clink of metal ornaments, the rustle of rich stuffs, the trickle of oils or perfumes as they were dropped into the crystal

bowls, the short and whispered questions of the women who were attiring the queen, or Cleopatra's no less low and rapid answers.

All the waiting-women not immediately occupied about the queen's person— perhaps twenty in all, young and old-ranged themselves along the sides of the great tent, either standing or sitting on the ground or on cushions, and awaiting the moment when it should be their turn to perform some service, as motionless as though spellbound by the mystical words of a magician. They only made signs to each other with their eyes and fingers, for they knew that the queen did not choose to be disturbed when she was being read to, and that she never hesitated to cast aside anything or anybody that crossed her wishes or inclinations, like a tight shoe or a broken lutestring.

Her features were irregular and sharp, her cheekbones too strongly developed, and the lips, behind which her teeth gleamed pearly white- though too widely set—were too full; still, so long as she exerted her great powers of concentration, and listened with flashing eyes, like those of a prophetess, and parted lips to the words of Plato, her face had worn an indescribable glow of feeling, which seemed to have come upon her from a higher and better world, and she had looked far more beautiful than now when she was fully dressed, and when her women crowded round her—Zoe having laid aside the Plato—with loud and unmeasured flattery.

Cleopatra delighted in being thus feted, and, in order to enjoy the adulation of a throng, she would always when dressing have a great number of women to attend her toilet; mirrors were held up to her on every side, a fold set right, and the jewelled straps of her sandals adjusted.

One praised the abundance of her hair, another the slenderness of her form, the slimness of her ankles, and the smallness of her tiny hands and feet. One maiden remarked to another—but loud enough to be heard— on the brightness of her eyes which were clearer than the sapphires on her brow, while the Athenian waiting-woman, Thais, declared that Cleopatra had grown fatter, for her golden belt was less easy to clasp than it had been ten days previously.

The queen presently signed to Zoe, who threw a little silver ball into a bowl of the same metal, elaborately wrought and decorated, and in a few minutes the tramp of the body-guard was audible outside the door of the tent.

Cleopatra went out, casting a rapid glance over the roof—now brightly illuminated with cressets and torches—and the white marble statues that gleamed out in relief against the dark clumps of shrubs; and then, without even looking at the tent where her children were asleep, she approached the litter, which had been brought up to the roof for her by the young Macedonian nobles. Zoe and Thais assisted her to mount into it, and her ladies, waiting-women, and others who had hurried out of the other tents, formed a row on each side of the way, and hailed their mistress with loud cries of admiration and delight as she passed by, lifted high above them all on the shoulders of her bearers. The diamonds in the handle of her feather-fan sparkled brightly as Cleopatra waved a gracious adieu to her women, an adieu which did not fail to remind them how infinitely beneath her were those she greeted. Every movement of her hand was full of regal pride, and her eyes, unveiled and untempered, were radiant with a young woman's pleasure in a perfect toilet, with satisfaction in her own person, and with the anticipation of the festive hours before her.

The litter disappeared behind the door of the broad steps that led up to the roof, and Thais, sighing softly, said to herself, "If only for once I could ride through the air in just such a pretty shell of colored and shining mother-of-pearl, like a goddess! carried aloft by young men, and hailed and admired by all around me! High up there the growing Selene floats calmly and silently by the tiny stars, and just so did she ride past in her purple robe with her torch-bearers and flames and lights-past us humble creatures, and between the tents to the banquet—and to what a banquet, and what guests! Everything up here greets her with rejoicing, and I could almost fancy that among those still marble statues even the stern face of Zeno had parted its lips, and spoken flattering words to her. And yet poor little Zoe, and the fair-haired Lysippa, and the black-haired daughter of Demetrius, and even I, poor wretch, should be handsomer, far handsomer than she, if we could dress ourselves with

fine clothes and jewels for which kings would sell their kingdoms; if we could play Aphrodite as she does, and ride off in a shell borne aloft on emerald-green glass to look as if it were floating on the waves; if dolphins set with pearls and turquoises served us for a footstool, and white ostrich-plumes floated over our heads, like the silvery clouds that float over Athens in the sky of a fine spring day. The transparent tissue that she dared not put on would well become me! If only that were true which Zoe was reading yesterday, that the souls of men were destined to visit the earth again and again in new forms! Then perhaps mine might some day come into the world in that of a king's child. I should not care to be a prince, so much is expected of him, but a princess indeed! That would be lovely!"

These and such like were Thais' dreams, while Zoe stood outside the tent of the royal children with her cousin, the chief-attendant of prince Philopator, carrying on an eager conversation in a low tone. The child's nurse from time to time dried her eyes and sobbed bitterly as she said: "My own baby, my other children, my husband and our beautiful house in Alexandria—I left them all to suckle and rear a prince. I have sacrificed happiness, freedom, and my nights'-sleep for the sake of the queen and of this child, and how am I repaid for all this? As if I were a lowborn wench instead of the daughter and wife of noble men; this woman, half a child still, scarcely yet nineteen, dismisses me from her service before you and all her ladies every ten days! And why? Because the ungoverned blood of her race flows in her son's veins, and because he does not rush into the arms of a mother who for days does not ask for him at all, and never troubles herself about him but in some idle moment when she has gratified every other whim. Princes distribute favor or disgrace with justice only so long as they are children. The little one understands very well what I am to him, and sees what Cleopatra is. If I could find it in my heart to ill-use him in secret, this mother—who is not fit to be a mother—would soon have her way. Hard as it would be to me so soon to leave the poor feeble little child, who has grown as dear to my soul as my own—aye and closer, even closer, as I may well say—this time I will do it, even at the risk of Cleopatra's plunging us into ruin, my husband and me, as she has done to so many who have dared to contravene her will."

The wet-nurse wept aloud, but Zoe laid her hand on the distressed woman's shoulder, and said soothingly: "I know you have more to submit to from Cleopatra's humors than any of us all, but do not be overhasty. Tomorrow she will send you a handsome present, as she so often has done after being unkind; and though she vexes and hurts you again and again, she will try to make up for it again and again till, when this year is over, your attendance on the prince will be at an end, and you can go home again to your own family. We all have to practise patience; we live like people dwelling in a ruinous house with to-day a stone and to-morrow a beam threatening to fall upon our heads. If we each take calmly whatever befalls us our masters try to heal our wounds, but if we resist may the gods have mercy on us! for Cleopatra is like a strung bow, which sets the arrow flying as soon as a child, a mouse, a breath of air even touches it—like an over-full cup which brims over if a leaf, another drop, a single tear falls into it. We should, any one of us, soon be worn out by such a life, but she needs excitement, turmoil and amusement at every hour. She comes home late from a feast, spends barely six hours in disturbed slumber, and has hardly rested so long as it takes a pebble to fall to the ground from a crane's claw before we have to dress her again for another meal. From the council-board she goes to hear some learned discourse, from her books in the temple to sacrifice and prayer, from the sanctuary to the workshops of artists, from pictures and statues to the audience-chamber, from a reception of her subjects and of foreigners to her writing-room, from answering letters to a procession and worship once more, from the sacred services back again to her dressing-tent, and there, while she is being attired she listens to me while I read the most profound works—and how she listens! not a word escapes her, and her memory retains whole sentences. Amid all this hurry and scurry her spirit must need be like a limb that is sore from violent exertion, and that is painfully tender to every rough touch. We are to her neither more nor less than the wretched flies which we hit at when they trouble us, and may the gods be merciful to those on whom this queen's hand may fall! Euergetes cleaves with the sword all that comes in his way. Cleopatra stabs with the dagger, and

her hand wields the united power of her own might and of her yielding husband's. Do not provoke her. Submit to what you cannot avert; just as I never complain when, if I make a mistake in reading, she snatches the book from my hand, or flings it at my feet. But I, of course, have only myself to fear for, and you have your husband and children as well."

Praxinoa bowed her head at these words in sad assent, and said:

"Thank you for those words! I always think only from my heart, and you mostly from your head. You are right, this time again there is nothing for me to do but to be patient; but when I have fulfilled the duties here, which I undertook, and am at home again, I will offer a great sacrifice to Asclepias and Hygiea, like a person recovered from a severe illness; and one thing I know: that I would rather be a poor girl, grinding at a mill, than change with this rich and adored queen who, in order to enjoy her life to the utmost, carelessly and restlessly hurries past all that our mortal lot has best to offer. Terrible, hideous to me seems such an existence with no rest in it! and the heart of a mother which is so much occupied with other things that she cannot win the love of her child, which blossoms for every hired nurse, must be as waste as the desert! Rather would I endure anything—everything—with patience than be such a queen!"

CHAPTER VIII

"What! No one to come to meet me?" asked the queen, as she reached the foot of the last flight of porphyry steps that led into the ante-chamber to the banqueting-hall, and, looking round, with an ominous glance, at the chamberlains who had accompanied her, she clinched her small fist. "I arrive and find no one here!"

The "No one" certainly was a figure of speech, since more than a hundred body-guards-Macedonians in rich array of arms—and an equal number of distinguished court-officials were standing on the marble flags of the vast hall, which was surrounded by colonnades, while the star-spangled night-sky was all its roof; and the court-attendants were all men of rank, dignified by the titles of fathers, brothers, relatives, friends and chief-friends of the king.

These all received the queen with a many-voiced "Hail!" but not one of them seemed worthy of Cleopatra's notice. This crowd was less to her than the air we breathe in order to live—a mere obnoxious vapor, a whirl of dust which the traveller would gladly avoid, but which he must nevertheless encounter in order to proceed on his way.

The queen had expected that the few guests, invited by her selection and that of her brother Euergetes to the evening's feast, would have welcomed her here at the steps; she thought they would have seen her—as she felt herself—like a goddess borne aloft in her shell, and that she might have exulted in the admiring astonishment of the Roman and of Lysias, the Corinthian: and now the most critical instant in the part she meant to play that evening had proved a failure, and it suggested itself to her mind that she might be borne back to her roof-tent, and be floated down once more when she was sure of the presence of the company. But there was one thing she dreaded more even than pain and remorse, and that was any appearance of the ridiculous; so she only commanded the bearers to stand still, and while the master of the ceremonies, waiving his dignity, hurried off to announce to her husband that she was approaching, she signed to the nobles highest in rank to approach, that she might address a few gracious words to them, with distant amiability. Only a few however, for the doors of thya wood leading into the banqueting hall itself, presently opened, and the king with his friends came forward to meet Cleopatra.

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